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SUBJECT: CONSTITUTIONAL REVISION TAKES SPOTLIGHT

Classified By: POL M/C Joseph Y. Yun. Reasons 1.4 (b,d).

¶1. (C) Summary: In a surprise statement last week President Roh proposed a constitutional revision to change the current single five-year presidential term to a renewable four-year term to synchronize the presidential and general elections. Roh said he would soon initiate a bill to revise the constitution for National Assembly approval. If the revision receives two thirds support in the Assembly, a national referendum would be held. Despite general support for the revision, most Koreans, disappointed with the Roh administration, think the revision should be handled by the next administration. Many also question Roh's motivations for the proposal -- Roh's lack of popularity is such that people do not want to support any proposal if it is Roh's. End summary.

Bill Unlikely to Pass

¶2. (C) President Roh Moo-hyun announced in a televised press conference on January 9 his plan to pursue a constitutional change that would change the current single five-year presidential term to two four-year terms. He asserted South Korea was democratically mature enough to prevent a recurrence of the personal long-term rule of the 1970s and 1980s, the original intent of the 1987 amendment in limiting president's to a single five-year term. Roh noted that this was a once in 20 year opportunity to synchronize the presidential and parliamentary elections, because the National Assembly elections take place every four years and the next ones are scheduled for April 2008, a few months after the December 2007 presidential elections. The constitutional amendment process takes from 60-100 days from the day it is proposed to the National Assembly for discussion by either majority Assemblymen or by the president. If approved by two-thirds of the Assembly within 60 days, it has to gain a majority in a national referendum within 30 days of the National Assembly approval.

¶3. (C) In principle, all political parties and the public agree that the proposed constitutional amendment reflects a needed change. At the same time, they also assert that the revision should wait until the next government. The Grand National Party (GNP) is set firmly against the proposal and has demanded the revision be pursued by the next administration. Minority parties and NGO's declared that they support the proposal but do not agree with President Roh's method and said with the election approaching, it was not the right time for the amendment. In a show of

disagreement with Roh's proposal, all National Assembly opposition leaders (GNP and minority parties) did not attend a Blue House lunch on January 11 to discuss the proposed amendment. A leading political analyst, Professor Kang Won-taek, told poloff that it would be impossible for the bill to pass if the GNP opposes the amendment since the GNP holds 127 of the 299 Assembly seats.

¶4. (C) According to polls taken by all major local media outlets and research centers on January 9-10, people object to Roh's administration managing the change despite the fact they are not opposed to the idea of the revision. Polls indicate those who support the proposed constitutional revision is slightly more than, or similar to, that of opponents (MBC-Korea Research showed that 51 percent of the people polled supported the constitutional revision against 40 percent who opposed; and 43 percent supported the change versus 43.5 percent who were against the revision in a Hankyoreh-Research Plus survey). In addition, far more respondents said they wanted to see the next government propose the revision. According to a joint poll by MBC Research and Gallup, about 63 percent of those surveyed on January 10 said Roh's administration should not be the one to make the change. In a poll by Korea Society Opinion Institute in February 2006, 45 percent of those surveyed said that the constitutional amendment should wait until the next president. Moreover, in a January 9, 2007 KBS-Media Research survey only 14.3 percent of those surveyed believed that the revision was likely to happen in the Roh administration compared to 76.6 percent of who did not.

Constitutional Revision Politically Motivated?

¶5. (C) Suspicions about President Roh's timing of the proposed constitutional revision have been looming since the proposal was first announced. According to an Uri Party official, the media was shocked by the announcement as there was no advance notice given Roh even late the night before in an informal meeting he had with progressive media. Pundits and government officials opposed to the revision offered three explanations for the proposal's timing: first, influence the 2007 presidential elections; second, avert the lame duck status in the face of increasing attacks from ruling and opposition lawmakers; and third try to build some legacy for his largely failed administration. Many argue that Roh is pursuing the amendment in an attempt to prove that he is still a political player and can affect the December presidential elections. Some pundits have also claimed that President Roh, by steering attention away from the Uri party reshuffle and dominant GNP candidates, was trying to buy time to search for a viable Uri candidate.

¶6. (C) Some experts and national assembly members have alleged that Roh is seeking to prevent or delay a probable Uri Party break-up -- the Uri Party is expected to break up officially at the party's convention on February 14. An Uri Party official pointed out the President made the proposal immediately after Representative Yeom Dong-youn resigned from the party. Yeom was a close supporter of Roh and was also one of the founding members of the Uri Party. Yeom's defection was the first significant sign that the ruling party could truly dissolve. Roh may hope that a successful constitutional amendment would not only bring up his popularity but also attract more public support for the Uri Party.

¶7. (C) Park Sung-min, a leading political consultant, commented that whether Roh intended it or not, his proposal is likely to help him restore his political influence. GNP Representative Park Jin lamented to poloff that however little chance the amendment had of success, Roh was proposing something that the GNP would have to oppose. He added that this was the GNP dilemma -- the party should avoid being perceived as too conservative by blocking a good idea, but in this case, they must oppose the proposal.

Hard-Core Roh Support

18. (C) There are some Uri officials who welcome the revision and one Uri official told poloff that he believes President Roh's intentions were genuine. The official noted that the constitutional revision is not a new concept, but rather a campaign pledge Roh made when running for office. Roh has indicated he may consider withdrawing from the Uri Party if the opposition demands it as a precondition for passing the constitutional amendment but has denied any possibility of resigning before his term ends, in response to critics that have questioned his motives behind the proposal.

Comment

19. (C) The significance of the amendment proposal itself is minimal as it will almost certainly be blocked by the GNP. The announcement by Roh took focus off of the front-running GNP candidates and off of the woes of the Roh government. With a popularity rating of single digits, the lowest popularity rating ever for a Korean president, Roh is grasping for straws. The amendment proposal appears to have run its course but until the political focus in Korea shifts 100 percent to the presidential race, likely in July, Roh may try to shake up the political scene in Korea while he is still able.

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